

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

DATE	06/03/2025
REPORT OF	Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services
SUBJECT	Children's Services Social Care Improvement Journey
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

In the context of stronger communities, nurturing our children and building their future is one of the core priorities within the refreshed Council Plan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Led by the North East Lincolnshire Council (NELC) Children's Services Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and supported by Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP), progress continues to be made as part of the Children's Services improvement journey.

In the context of our refreshed improvement plan, and led by the DfE Commissioner, the Continuous Improvement Board continues to oversee the progress, impact and outcomes against our strategic objectives, in the context of high support and high challenge. There is also an continued focus on inspection preparedness for the pending Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services in 2025.

Under the auspices of our assurance framework, and our ongoing focus on listening, learning, reviewing and adapting, we commissioned a LGA peer review of our corporate parenting arrangements. This was held in January 2025, and the outcomes, which were shared with elected members and system leaders, reflected our own self-assessment and, overall, demonstrated progress in our local arrangements.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

This report seeks to update scrutiny panel members on NELC's Children's Services improvement journey and ensure that scrutiny members are briefed on the performance and implementation of the ongoing Improvement Plan.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1. New SLIP arrangements were enacted from the end March 2024, which demonstrated confidence in the NELC leadership and management team's capacity to co-ordinate and facilitate the improvement arrangements. A robust SLIP delivery programme was developed involving four Local Authority SLIP partners (North Tyneside, Camden, Leeds and North Yorkshire), along with individual SLIP delivery partners, all of whom have contributed to the implementation of our priority areas of focus. These workstreams are drawing to a close for 2024/25 and work is underway to consider how we might make use of sector led improvement capacity in 2025/26.
- 1.2. The most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit was undertaken in September 2024, with a focus on children in need (CIN) and children in need of protection (CP). Ofsted found that since January 2023, children subject to CIN/CP planning are better safeguarded. The full report is available here: [NELC Ofsted Monitoring Visit September 2024](#).

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

2.1. In the context of the Improvement Plan, the risk register was refreshed in November 2024 to ensure alignment with the revised Improvement Plan and is refreshed on a monthly basis and reported into Continuous Improvement Board. Where agreed, risks have been removed as they have been deemed to be decreasing / resolved, and mitigating actions are in place and ongoing for all remaining risks, which have been deemed to be decreasing and stable.

2.2. As we move forwards in our improvement journey, opportunities to drive forward transformational change includes:

- **WORKFORCE:** The permanent, experienced leadership and management team continues to be in place, and change management processes progress as required to ensure additional / appropriate capacity to drive forward practice improvements and transformational change. There is an ongoing focus on workforce development including recruitment and retention
- **QUALITY OF PRACTICE:** Creating the conditions to enhance the consistency and quality of practice i.e. as a result of an amplified focus on supervision, direct work and risk analysis
- **SECTOR LED IMPROVEMENT:** Utilising the added value of sector led support, and independent scrutiny, to enhance our improvement journey leading to practice improvements
- **FINANCIAL ENVELOPE:** Using the money that's in the system to best effect (including through core and grant funding) and operate in the context of high challenge and high support in relation to commissioned arrangements and to ensure a sufficient offer across the system
- **MANAGING POPULATIONS AND DEMAND:** Refreshed practice approach and threshold document, with partners integrated into the front door, and management oversight and audit framework to manage populations and demand
- **PARTNERSHIPS:** Amplified focus on how partners/partnerships contribute to the children's system and creating a culture which enables high challenge and high support; refresh of partnership governance and reporting arrangements and clarity regarding roles, responsibilities and opportunities for creativity and innovate to create change
- **SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES:** Performance and data are key enablers and an imminent rationalisation of education systems and changes to Liquid Logic, will be key to managing populations and demand and ensuring effective assurance and oversight. Utilisation of AI will also create efficiencies, enhance productivity and enable more focus on direct interventions and support
- **CORPORATE AND COMMUNITY PARENTING:** Raising awareness of corporate and community parenting responsibilities that contribute to the development and implementation of the corporate and community parenting offer and care leaver offer, in the spirit of 'would this be good enough for my child'

- **SUFFICIENCY:** Ongoing amplified focus on the foster friendly initiative and the development of the fostering offer to value and increase the number of foster carers; and the development of our children's home provision, and supported accommodation / housing options
- **LISTEN, LEARN, REVIEW, ADAPT:** Through our assurance framework (taking account of voice, performance/data and practice wisdom), we are able to listen, learn, review and adapt at an individual level, but also across the service, wider Council and partnership, and from a regulatory and statutory perspective, in order to continue to make progress and improve outcomes
- **POLICY DRIVERS:** Take account of and respond to key policy drivers i.e. Keeping children safe, helping families thrive to further develop our transformation agenda

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1. There is dedicated communications officer capacity linked to Children's Services which is contributing to enhanced, proactive and responsive communications across the workforce and from an external perspective, including in the context of our amplified focus on recruitment marketing activity.
- 3.2. We continue to promote NELC as a place to work including via social media channels; and there is an ongoing focus on further building relationships with key partners, agencies and organisations across the place of North East Lincolnshire. This is having a demonstrable positive impact on our culture, public perceptions and on recruitment

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1. The DfE have directly awarded improvement funding to NELC which demonstrates their confidence in our capacity to manage our improvement priorities.
- 4.2. The continuing approach to our priority areas of focus is showing a positive impact on the budget trajectories, in the context of investing to save. We are also providing high challenge and high support across partnerships to ensure all are consistently and comparatively contributing to the local children's agenda.
- 4.3. A continued focus on key improvement priorities will result in continued improvements in the quality of practice, reducing demand and meeting need at the lowest level which will contribute to good financial management and planning.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Improvement journey: recent areas of focus and key highlights against our strategic objectives

5.1.1. Embed our empowering leadership and management approach

- A planned programme of work is progressing at pace to review and refresh the Children's Services policies and procedures to ensure ongoing compliance and preparedness for the transition from Tri-X to internal arrangements (from March 2025). This will enable us to have a more flexible and proactive approach to the ongoing review and roll out of our policies and procedures, and to ensure responsiveness to national policy drivers

- There is an amplified focus on exploring and piloting opportunities to utilise Artificial Intelligence across Children's Services as a means of creating efficiencies, developing productivity and enabling more of a focus on direct intervention
- We have held a programme of DCS thematic assurance sessions across the scope of children's social care with a focus on supervision, as well as a deep dive audit session, all of which have demonstrated ongoing progress in relation to the compliance and quality of supervision
- We have continued our focus on embedding our relational approach, which has been supported by a facilitated leadership development programme, across front line practitioners, and we have a further planned programme of work with specific cohorts across Children's Services, as well as other sessions with the wider Council, partnership, schools and education settings
- A Children's Services SharePoint platform has been developed and launched across the workforce as a central resource to find a wealth of guidance, resources, toolkits, communications and policies and procedures to support staff in the roles and in your practice and provides a hub of knowledge and information. There is also access to a range of Continuous Professional Development resources to enhance their skills and knowledge. As part of this, the workforce development team routinely distributed direct work resources in relation to specific topics i.e. neglect, child exploitation and working with men and male carers
- We have secured additional advocacy capacity through an in year contract variation, and we are targeting children and young people to raise awareness and to encourage and support them to take up the offer of an advocate
- On Care Day 2025, we relaunched our independent visitors 'Buddies' scheme across the Council, and beyond, which will enable children in our care and care leavers to have a trusted relationship with someone who is just there for them. Work is ongoing to raise awareness to prospective buddies, and to encourage and support children and young people to take it up
- We are reshaping and rearticulating Our Voice Listen Up to extend opportunities for children in our care and care leavers, through influencers, socials, bakers and creative, to encourage and support them to have their say and engage in activity and workstreams that are of interest to them. Building on the Winter Wishes event, which took place in December 2024, we have also developed a programme of activities for children in need and children in need of protection
- Most recently, we engaged with a young person to prepare their input at the Corporate Parenting Board, and we supported another young person to engage in the meeting, at which they articulately shared their opinions, views and experiences. As a result of young people's representations, we have developed a programme of creative conversations around specific subject matters

5.1.2. **Help, support and protect our children, young people and families**

- Family Help are represented at the newly established Closure Panel which is ensuring appropriate plans are in place for cases to safely step down from children in need to Family Help. Through attendance at the panel, this has enabled practitioners to consider other exit strategies e.g. start for life and family hub activities, including group activities and commissioned services
- As a result of collaborative working and system developments, Live System C data is now in place within the Integrated Front Door which has greatly enhanced the live oversight and 24 hour / 72 hour decision making
- Child led/inclusive practice continues to be a priority to ensure plans are co-produced with children and families and to consider how they could jointly complete case records. Developments in this area are underpinned by training, team meetings and supervision
- Arrangements at Child Protection Conferences have been refreshed to adopt a more relational approach i.e. refreshments are now available, and during a recent observation of a conference, it was noted that the father in attendance was supported to actively contribute to the discussions around risk in which he added inputs to the protective factors
- There is ongoing sharpened focus on manager oversight in between supervisions to track actions, supervision following trigger / significant incidents and within five days of an audit being completed, as well as joint supervision between family help and youth justice
- There is an ongoing focus on recruiting social workers, particularly across the case management team(s), and young people have set a value based question for all social work appointments
- The MACE attendees have been revised and there is a strengthened focus on the partner actions to disrupt hotspots and share information regarding offenders and OCGs to tackle effectively using the range of legislation and tools available

5.1.3. **Deliver a high quality offer for children in our care**

- There is a continued focus on reviewing plans for children in external placements with a view to returning more children to live within their community, and plans are in place to support the transition to the new arrangements
- Work is progressing to review and refresh the fostering website, which will include new content and a financial handbook for foster carers, in addition to the refreshed Fostering Statement of Purpose

- The number of fostering businesses continued to grow and we now have more than 130 businesses signed up to be fostering friendly, plus a further 30+ schools. As a result, there are more fostering enquiries and we anticipate at least 11 more foster carers being approved by the end March 2025
- Consultation and engagement with foster carers have been integral to developing the new allowance model and the skills framework. All carers have been informed on their outcome of the skills assessment and consultation continues in embedding the new training and development programme to upskill carers
- We have established Personal Education Plan (PEP) Quality Assurance Meetings which enabled leaders across the Children in Care Team and Virtual School to come together to collectively review the quality of completed PEPs. This identified some useful learning and will be a regular part of the quality assurance mechanism in relation to educational outcomes for children in our care
- We are reviewing our protocols related to care planning meetings to ensure consistency of practice across the service. This includes guidance on the frequency of meetings that focus on the progress of a child or young person's care plan, alongside the recording of progress and actions planning from the meetings

5.1.4. **Deliver a high quality offer for care leavers**

- There is an amplified focus on develop the employability offer for our care leavers, and work is underway to co-produce a 'how to' guide to support young people into and to remain in employment
- Following recent recruitment drive, all care leavers now have an allocated Personal Advisor, and there is a continued focus on developing the quality of practice and ensuring consistent recording
- We have now developed a further 22 additional units of accommodation for our care leavers, and further options are also in development. In the context of our Corporate and Community Parenting Board governance arrangements, a housing options sub group has been established to continue to drive forward these developments
- Ten care leavers signed up the Health and Care Partnership employability programme which will provide the opportunity to gain employment preparation skills, alongside training and employment opportunities. It also ensure that these young people are engaged in a fixed programme of training and learning and will no longer be NEET
- The Leaving Care Team are developing specific themed drop in support sessions which will focus on building and developing key independent living and life skills for young people leaving care

5.1.5. **Develop the quality of our learning and education landscape for all children**

- A system leaders conference took place in February 2025, at which more than 150 representatives from schools, education settings and the wider partnership were in attendance. There were focussed sessions at the event in relation to vulnerable groups, mental health and resilience, and a focus on inclusion. Feedback was extremely positive and further opportunities have been identified for ongoing collaboration, in the context of attendance being everyone's business
- An electively home educated (EHE) round table event took place in January 2025, which was well represented across the partnership, included elected members, who came together to discuss the complexities in relation to EHE. Children's voice and their lived experiences was at the heart of the session, and there is an ongoing commitment to working across the partnership to ensure a place based approach to support for our EHE children and young people
- Through our sector led partners, and supported by the LGA, we have commissioned a peer review of our virtual school arrangements, which will provide an opportunity for us to reflect on the progress to date, and to posit some ideas to further develop our arrangements (for children in our care, but also to consider our extension duties for children with a social worker)

5.2. **LGA Corporate Parenting Peer Review**

- 5.2.1. We commissioned the LGA to undertake a corporate parenting peer review, which took place in January 2025. The peer team, which consisted of the LGA lead, a retired Director of Children's Services and Lead Member, had access to a plethora of documents which evidenced our corporate parenting journey and current position, including our self-assessment.
- 5.2.2. The focus of the peer review was to consider the voice and influence of children in our care, care leavers and care experienced young people, the effectiveness of our Corporate Parenting Board, partnership arrangements and the impact of our education, employability and health and wellbeing offer across the Borough.
- 5.2.3. During their three days on site, they observed the Corporate Parenting Board, held a further 24 meetings, and met with 60 members of staff across Children's Services, the Council and the wider partnership.
- 5.2.4. Overall, the feedback demonstrated progress against the corporate parenting agenda, with an acknowledgement of some key areas for development, all of which resonated with our self-assessment. Summary headlines and overall messages from the LGA Peer Team observations were that:
 - The impact of permanent, driven team appreciated by all
 - Strong political leadership – commitment to 'protected characteristics'
 - Achieving change rapidly due to cohesive team
 - Transformational change in almost all partner relations
 - Borough involvement – businesses, schools, politicians

- 5.2.5. A Corporate and Community Parenting Development Session has been scheduled in March 2025, at which the specific outcomes of the peer review will be shared. The outcomes of the self-assessment and the peer review, will form the basis on a new Corporate and Community Parenting Board development plan, which will be overseen by the board.

5.3. Children's Social Care performance update

- 5.3.1. There is continued oversight of performance across Children's Services on a day-to-day basis, week-to-week and month-to-month basis, and there is routine reporting, oversight and tracking across relevant governance and partnership arrangements, including in the context of the Continuous Improvement Board.

- 5.3.2. Key performance exceptions and highlights are included in appendix 2.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. No impact

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. No impact

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. No impact

9. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. No impact

10. MONITORING COMMENTS

- 10.1. This report does not contain recommended changes to policy or resources (people, finance or physical assets). As a result no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer (Chief Legal Officer), Section 151 Officer (Director of Finance) or Strategic Workforce Lead.

11. WARD IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. All wards impacted

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1. None

13. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

- 13.1. Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services

ANN-MARIE MATSON

DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

APPENDIX 1: Performance exceptions and highlights

Further key headlines (as at February 2024) include:

- Average caseloads have remained consistent, and have not increased, for frontline social workers. This continues to have daily oversight, and the ongoing recruitment of more permanent social workers will continue to have a positive impact on this
- The overall timeliness of supervision remains stable, and the large majority is held in timescales. There continues to be robust management oversight to ensure consistency, to maintain and build on compliance, and to improve quality
- The number of cases open to Family Help has slightly increased, and as part of this, the number of children stepping down to Family Help is the highest level seen in recent months, which demonstrates that more children are receiving help and support at the earliest point, and without the need for statutory social work intervention
- The number of contacts at the Integrated Front Door has increased, though this is in line with prior seasonal trends (i.e. demand increases in January 2025 after the Christmas break)
- The timeliness of contacts to referrals has increased, which is as a result of the new live dashboard at the Integrated Front Door, while re-referral rates remains stable, and is in line with comparators
- Children in need numbers have remained higher than our improvement plan target levels and the number of children on a child protection plan and children in care continues to remain fairly static overall
- The rolling rate of initial child protection conferences held in timescales has increased, and is in line with statutory neighbours, and better than other comparators, though it remains below our target levels. There remains an ongoing area of focus to ensure there are no delays to children progressing to child protection where appropriate
- The rate of child protection re-registrations has slightly increased in year, but remains better performance than our improvement plan target and better than the last published comparator data
- Visits in timescales to children in our care have improved in month, while visits in timescales to children in need and in need of protection have very slightly decreased, though there is daily oversight on this to maintain and further improve timeliness of visits
- More fostering enquiries are being received, which is have a positive impact on the number of households currently under assessment